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SOME DIFFICULTIES IN TEACHING HISTORY IN A SMALL HIGH SCHOOL

It is a fact that most persons who have not had experience in teaching history consider it one of the easiest subjects to teach. High-school trustees have told me that it did not matter about the history ; anyone could manage that and it was not worth while to bother about getting a specialist for that subject. A man must be hired for high-school work specially prepared for the Latin, the mathematics, or the science, but history could be divided among the teachers as a sort of piece work. But my experience has been that "so many problems arise and demand attention ; so difficult is it to hold the pupil to definite facts, and yet help him to see that he is studying a scene in the great drama of human life which has its perpetual exits and entrances ; so hard a task is it to stimulate the imagination while one is seeking to cultivate the reason and judgment, that the highest teaching power is necessary to complete success."¹

The difficulties discussed in this paper are those arising from personal experience in a small high school. They are offered without a remedy for themselves, unless they make their own cure apparent. They are confined to the teaching of history in a school where the pupils are drawn from the rural districts, and do not apply to larger cities where the course is organized through all the grades and the high school, and where the teachers are specialists in the various departments. But in these schools where only two or three teachers are employed for all of the work there are difficulties for the teacher, especially of history, to overcome. Consequently the points here discussed are difficulties under which we are laboring and are not discussed from an outside standpoint. They have been discussed in various ways in the numerous "studies" on elementary education and history teaching ; but the answers have not been adequate solutions for the difficulties in question.

¹ History in Schools, *Report of the Committee of Seven*, p. 114.

The first difficulty is the general one of introducing young minds into historical study; the second, the limitations of historical material and the teacher, and third, the previous work in history.

"Perhaps the most difficult problem for the teacher is to bring home to the minds of the pupils how differently other people have looked at things."¹ It is the difficulty of giving "that historical mindedness"² to the students of high-school age. It is the problem of making the pupils conscious of that "greater sense of reality"³ in referring to the past life of people. Every teacher of history has felt how difficult it is to carry the minds of pupils into past life and show them from the facts and expressions of men of other times the unfolding of human spirit and human institutions. The mind can hardly appreciate the time when *what is* was not, and work out the steps by which it came to be. The pupil at first invariably criticises past ages from their failures in the light of the present. The longest stride forward is made when the student views things from the other's standpoint, and puts himself in the other's place; when he realizes that men of the past were like himself, striving for various ends, and working under certain limitations and advantages which he has not.

This difficulty is a general one and is more or less true in all schools, large or small. However it is likely that it is more apparent in the small schools than in the larger, because the pupils in the small schools have not had the basis for history that those of the larger schools have had and there is not the same opportunity to consult good libraries and to have teachers who can devote all their time to this specialty.

And this brings me to speak of the second difficulty growing out of conditions in the smaller high schools, the libraries, or historical material, and the teacher. If a specialist⁴ in the subject of history found it difficult to get good "original material"

¹ HART, *Source Book*, Introduction, p. xix.

² DICEY, *History in Schools*, p. 116.

³ University of Pennsylvania, *Translations and Reprints*, p. 21.

⁴ MARY SHELDON BARNES, *Studies in Historical Method*, p. 138.

into the hands of pupils, how much more does the teacher in the secondary school with a number of classes in various subjects on his hands find it next to impossible to get material other than the dry bones of the text-book into the hands of his pupils. The "material" question does not settle itself so easily as that plan suggested in "Studies in European History."¹ And if one should attempt to follow such a bibliography as that offered by the University of California for high-school libraries he would have a great deal of heavy material on hand and about two thirds of it worthless, short of University courses in history. It is becoming an easier matter to procure material in cheap, convenient form prepared especially for secondary schools, and text-books are being written that are of more value, so that I have found a partial answer to this difficulty, but it is still a difficulty.

The teacher in the small secondary school cannot devote all his time to this specialty. Where is he to find time for his own preparation of the daily lesson if he has seven or eight recitations to conduct? And this is not an ideal case but an actuality in schools where there are from two to four teachers. This difficulty seems beyond solution as long as the smaller schools attempt to do the work adequate for entrance into the University. With but a limited amount of material and time, the teacher in the small high school must have had an exceedingly good preparation and must be able to present the work without being a constant student of the subject if he makes any success of his teaching at all. He surely cannot fill his pupils with the zeal of research if he has no time for research himself, but must spend all of his time "hearing lessons," and his pupils are likely to leave school with no abiding interests in this subject so full of inspiration.

The third difficulty under which the teacher in the small high school labors is the condition of the pupils entering from the elementary schools. This is not meant to be a condemnation of all elementary school work, for in the most of cases it is good. The same condition may exist to some extent in the

¹ FLING and CALDWELL, *Studies in European History*, p. 23, 24.

larger schools, but I think it is true to a greater degree in the rural high schools. The universities have forced upon the high schools the necessity of doing more work and of doing this more thoroughly, which is valuable for the pupils, but the pressure has not always exerted itself in the best direction in the elementary school. This may be only a local experience, but I suspect it is general from the statement "An inquiry in regard to history in the public schools of the different states leads to the conclusion that the instruction at present given in this subject leaves much to be desired."¹ The pupils of whom I speak had only the preparation obtained from the study of the state series text-book in history through the seventh and eighth grades, and in this study the work was generally carried on with reference to the county examination passed at the end of the year's work. A study of the questions used in these examinations reveals the fact that they require only the most formal memory work.

Take a class of pupils from such a preparation into the first year high school and examine your material. Suppose they begin the course in Greek history. In the first place, they understand how to answer definite questions about dates, and can recite well as long as allowed to memorize and give the text word for word, but they cannot work out the topics in their own language. In the second place, there is no grasp of the contents of paragraphs and chapters. They have no knowledge of the use of books, for they have used only one heretofore. In the third place, there is never a beam of pleasure at the recognition of a familiar name or person or story in this long maze of hard names and places. It is all "Greek" to them. There are no known interests to which to tie the threads of dull political, military and social affairs. Of course this is true of these pupils wherever you begin with them outside of their own country's history. The myths, the stories of heroes—of Theseus, of Heracles, of Socrates, of Leonidas, and of any of the personalities around whom the living interests of these times gathered cannot be used, for they have no knowledge of them. Consequently the Greek (or Roman or any other) history becomes

¹ *History in Schools*, Com. of Seven, p. 158, 159.

the rather formal study of military, political, and constitutional affairs, for we have not time to go back over these stories that should have been learned long before. A pupil cannot do much with Holm's *History of Greece* before he has seen some of the lives of Plutarch, for instance. All the interest and life are taken out of the work because of this absence of what should have been given in earlier years when the child was interested in this kind of thing. The content of his history can be valuable only as it is filled with characters with like affections, motives, and thoughts as himself.

"We desire to draw so near to historical persons, scenes, or occasions as to stand in their presence, to so exercise the imagination as to become the eye-witness of the facts."¹ But these persons and scenes and occasions have not been approached before the pupil entered the high school, and it is with the greatest difficulty that the teacher undertakes it in the high school. It is not desired that the pupils become historians in the grades, nor that they learn all about handling books and working out topics, but it does seem that we might expect them to enter our first year high school with a few centers of interest established, not only in American history, but in the general history of the race. It seems that they might have had some little independence given them in the use of the books, and that the work might have been begun in such a way that the high school could take it up and carry it on to some definiteness and depth.

These three lines indicate the difficulties we are struggling with in the small high schools, especially in those of California.

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¹ McMURRY, *Method in Lit. and Hist.*, p. 71.